



My Exchange Evaluation

Basic Information

Host University	University of Virginia
Semester & Year of Exchange	Semester 2 2018 (Fall Semester)
Otago degree(s)	Law and Performing Arts
Major(s)	

Academics/ course load

Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?

Course title	Language of instruction	Otago equivalent	Otago credit value
Directing 1	English	Directing	⅓ of 2 papers
Playwriting 1	English	Playwriting	⅓ of 2 papers
Comedy As Protest	English	300 Level theatre paper	⅓ of 2 papers
Criminology	English	Criminology paper through the Law school	1 paper

Any comments about these papers?

I really enjoyed how engaging the drama papers I took were. There was lots of class discussion and group work. Criminology was super interesting and even though it was American criminology I could see lots of parallels between the US and NZ. A lot of the theory that we learnt in criminology is universally as well.

How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?

It felt like we handed in more smaller assignments than we do at Otago but they weren't any harder. Directing and Comedy as Protest were also nearly 2 hours each per class, which I really enjoyed because it allowed you to get into the flow of whatever you were doing.

Accommodation

What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?

After reading some of the exchange evaluations and seeing that some people felt they wouldn't get a 'true American experience' if they lived in the International Residential College (the IRC), I decided that I wanted to find a flat of Americans to live with. I found a flat of girls through a facebook group called "University of Virginia (UVA) Housing, Sublets & Roommates". It was on 14th street which was a perfect location, really close to all of my classes (but you definitely don't need to live on 14th street, there are heaps of other streets within walking distance). But finding a group of randoms to live with always comes with a level of risk. You never know if or how well you'll get along with your flatmates. I really liked my flatmates, they were all lovely and invited me out with them, and I even went home with one of them for Thanksgiving. But I didn't get super close with any of them and I wouldn't say I 'clicked' with any of them. I think that it would be easier to meet people who were looking to go on adventures and experience new things if you lived in the IRC. I also think that living in the IRC would provide a level of security because if you don't like your roommate (I think you share a room with someone else in the IRC) you have a whole hall full of people that you can become friends with. There's bound to be a few you get along with. In hindsight I would have preferred to live in the IRC. I think you can create plenty of opportunities to get to know Americans and have a 'real' American experience by joining lots of clubs. Also the IRC residents are nearly 50/50 international and American so I wouldn't worry about only being surrounded by international students if you choose to live there. If you're not going to live in the IRC you should be prepared to make an extra effort to join lots of clubs so that you still have lots of opportunities to meet people in the event that you don't really gel with your flatmates.

Overall I felt pretty unsupported as an exchange student not living in the IRC. There were a couple of events planned but not enough to allow me to get to know the other exchange students very well at all. So like I said before, if you're going to find a flat, you really need to give yourself lots of opportunities to meet people at the start of your exchange. Join those clubs baby. Overcommit to begin with rather than undercommit, if you get too busy you can just drop out of some clubs.

Money matters

Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance

Living on 14th street in the house that I was in was REALLY expensive. I could definitely have done it cheaper but I was so nervous about finding a place that I kind of jumped at the first house that seemed good. It was about 1200 NZD a month for Rent but you definitely do not need to spend this much. The cheapest that I saw for flats was about 500 US per month. Living in the IRC is more expensive (but as I talked about before, is a really good option for meeting people).

Food was about the same as here in NZ, if not a little more. I bought all my own food because I was in a flat but if you live in a hall I think you have to pay for a meal plan (and then you'll go to a dining hall to eat all your meals).

Flights were about 1400 return from NZ to LAX through STA. That's just to the West Coast though and UVA is on the East Coast.

Health insurance is a big cost that I hadn't really factored in! I had to pay about 400 NZD a month for that. I didn't get contents insurance while I was there (but I probably should have).

Getting a visa was around 200-300 I think.

What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)

I used a cash passport but some retailers didn't accept them and I couldn't use it for internet banking so I ended up using my ANZ debit card quite a lot BUT my ANZ card got phished!! (which is when you put your bank card into an ATM and then take the details and copy it onto another card, and then someone uses the other card to access your money!). When I got back to NZ, my bank noticed some suspicious activity with my account. Someone from America was using my money!! Using a cash passport all the time probably would have prevented this. After this all happened I got told that you're never meant to put your card into an ATM machine if there isn't a green flashing light around the card slot - this is supposed to let you know the machine is safe. I would google this though.

Visas & Insurance

Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?

Yes, make sure you apply for your visa as far as in advance as you can. You'll have to travel to Auckland and be interviewed briefly at the American Consulate for this. When I booked my appointment online the only available interview date was 12 days before I left for the US, so I was nervous about that, but I kept checking the available appointment slots and a whole bunch of appointments suddenly opened up that were like a month before I left. I have no idea why this would have happened but it shows that it pays to keep checking the website.

Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?

Yes, you have to have a minimum level of Health Insurance. UVA will explain what you need. I used GeoBlue because they would let me buy a four month only policy whereas other companies insisted that it had to be for a full year. UVA also has their own health insurance plan that they offer. I called and asked if I could sign up for this for just one semester and the people on the phone said no, but then when I got there (after I'd signed up to GeoBlue) they said that you could sign up for the full year and then be refunded for the second semester if you were only at UVA for one semester.

I would do lots of research before choosing a provider. And let your parents help you! I was in a weird developmental stage where I insisted on organising everything for my exchange by myself but this kind of thing would have been sooo much easier if I had let my parents help me.

Extra-curricular/Social Activities

What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?

The Student Exchange programme organised a couple of walks, a trip to Thomas Jefferson's house, but not heaps to be honest. You've gotta go and make your own fun! I joined an Improv group called Amuse Bouche and it made my exchange. I had a really great time with them. I also joined First Year Players (a group that puts on a musical every semester) but it's hard to get to know people in that group if you're not actually in the musical, and I didn't want to be in it because I knew rehearsing for it would take up all of my time.

If you like singing I think joining an acapella group would be an awesome way to make friends! There are heaps of them. I wish I had joined the Salsa Club. A lot of exchange students join and they're very social so definitely consider that!

The Outdoors Club does heaps of trips too and the trips are first in first served so it's a good way to meet completely new and random people.

Overall, UVA is really big into they're clubs. And there's a culture of the clubs being social so joining them is a great way to meet people, and to get to know Americans if you're worried about only being around other exchange students.

What was the university/ city like?

The grounds are beautiful, old and impressive. Charlottesville is trees and forests for days. The city centre (Downtown) is quite small, I didn't really go there very much. There is so much culture and pride at UVA. People love to rep their school and support all the events that go on there. Your university is a huge part of your identity and I kind of loved that about America.

Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?

Go to Shenandoah National Park! It's so close, I wish I had gone more. Eat Bodo's once at least because it's a UVA classic. EAT CHICKEN AND WAFFLES, YOU ARE IN THE SOUTH, YOU HAVE TO. And then tell me what they were like cause I couldn't bring myself to do it.

If you are there in the Fall semester and make friends with someone who has family in the area, maybe see if you can have Thanksgiving dinner with them! Thanksgiving with my roommates family is one of my favourite memories.

Go to all the uni events, like the sports games (college football!!!) and Trick or Treating on the Lawn, and Lighting of the Lawn. And the acapella concerts. Then you'll see the real difference between NZ uni and the US.

There's also a great music scene in Charlottesville, heaps of great artists play there so go to some concerts!

Any tips for future students?

American college is so incredibly different from NZ. At least that's how it felt for me. Get fully immersed in clubs and events and the culture, get to know the Americans. As an anecdote: there was one weekend where I had to choose between going to Washington DC by myself, or staying in Charlottesville and going to a frat formal. I went to DC and regretted it. You'll only be at UVA once so make the most of it! You can see the rest of America any other time in your life.

Also don't worry if you're lonely at the start. If you're like me you literally won't know anyone going into this exchange. It's a big thing to make friends in a new place but if you join lots of groups, I think you'll be just fine. If you feel like you're a little lonely, join more groups! Go on trips with the Outdoors Club. Don't expect things to happen spontaneously - sometimes they will happen that way but mostly you need to be making sure you have things to do. I definitely wasn't proactive enough in this regard so don't make my mistake!

Also, don't be afraid to ask for help! And ask people to show you around! I think as Kiwis we can be pretty hesitant to ask for help. We're a little too proud sometimes but Americans are honestly so lovely and they will help you! And they'll be happy to do it too.

Overall Experience

Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!

Going on exchange was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but also by far the most rewarding. Due to some unfortunate personal circumstances (my boyfriend breaking up with me a week into my exchange), my exchange got off to a really rough start and because of that I had some very lonely and low times. But I also had LOTS of moments where I just couldn't believe how lucky I was to be on exchange. And lots of times that were just major fun. I'm honestly so glad I went. I guess what I'm trying to say is don't have any expectations. Be ready and willing to be thrown out of your comfort

zone, be ready to grow, to try new things. Be proactive!! Join the clubs. Go on trips. Take the good with the bad, because there'll most likely be both, and know that whatever happens, you are growing, and learning.